



Poster Lesson: Clay “Fossils” Inspired by Mount St. Helens

A 120 - minute classroom or gallery activity

Grades K-8

Lesson Overview: A compression fossil is formed when plants or animals are placed under physical pressure by layer upon layer of sediment that eventually hardens into rock. It’s very common to find fossils formed this way along rivers and lakes where fine sediment quickly encases an object before it has time to decompose—like during the Mount St. Helens eruption. In a process known as carbonization or distillation, a plant can be reduced to a carbon film that displays the exquisite details of the fossil. In this project, students will create their own “fossil” based on their natural environment.

Suggested Posters: (one or more as you would like)

- *Under the Volcano*, George Johanson

Materials:

- air-dry clay
- metallic paints
- natural plant materials
- paintbrushes

Before the Lesson:

Task I: Watch film clip of Mount St. Helens eruption and discuss impact on the environment; share images or examples of fossils. Have students imagine how they might have reacted during the eruption and draw, perform, or write a story based on their ideas. Alternately, Students could share about a Storm or other natural event that they have experienced in real life.

Extension: Discuss how a fossil can record a before/after event, when things are never the same afterward. What events in Students’ lives are also marked by a before/after moment?

Task II: Nature walk! Have students gather leaves, twigs, stones, and other flora to be used in making clay impressions. Have them notice the weather, time of year, and any other features of nature that are visible.

Lesson Steps:

Task III: Form balls of clay and flatten, smoothing edges. Press natural materials into clay & then use dry brushing technique to apply metallic paint. Remove natural materials and leave to dry.

Task IV: Optional: Once clay & paint are fully dry, apply a contrasting color of paint as a wash, 50% paint and 50% water. Wipe back surface so paint stays in details of “fossil.”

Task V: Draw finished “fossil” in sketchbook. Label with plant information where available.

NCAS Standards:

Create: A.1	<u>Generate</u> and <u>conceptualize</u> artistic ideas and work.
Respond: A.7	<u>Perceive</u> and <u>analyze</u> artistic work.
Respond: A.9	<u>Apply</u> criteria to <u>evaluate</u> artistic work.
Connect: A.11	<u>Relate</u> artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

Essential Questions:

- *How does our experience of the natural world connect to our sense of identity?*
- *How do the Stories we tell about nature shape communities, cultures, and perspectives?*

Learning Targets:

I can...

- make connections between past events and the world around me
- make observations about the natural world
- mold clay and make impressions
- use a variety of painting techniques
- draw, talk and write about my artwork

Elements & Principles Focus:

- Shape, form, texture, emphasis

Technical Skills Focus:

- Embossing/Stamping
- 3d molding and textures
- dry-brushing
- observational drawing

Resources:

- <https://cdn.dick-blick.com/lessonplans/luminous-fossil-prints/luminous-fossil-prints-fossils.pdf>
- [Mount St. Helens](#)
- [Smithsonian Museum of Natural History / Mount St. Helens](#)
- [Fossils for Kids](#)